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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement submitted by Anti-Slavery International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 December 1999]

GE.00-10512 (E)

1. On 2 December 1999, the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, reminded the international community that this "is not a time for complacency in the fight against slavery, but a time for action". The Secretary-General went on to note that:

> "... there is an urgent need for laws and action to ensure that new forms of exploitation and oppression are not allowed to occur, and that old forms of slavery are eradicated, once and for all. Trafficking and related practices such as debt bondage, forced prostitution and forced labour are violations of the most basic human rights."

2. Anti-Slavery International strongly supports the Secretary-General's comments and his call for action in order to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, which are still prevalent even as we enter the twenty-first century.

3. Debt bondage, which is also referred to as bonded labour, is a contemporary form of slavery that Anti-Slavery International would particularly wish to draw to the attention of the Commission. Debt bondage is prohibited under article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and specifically under article 1 of the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery of 1956. International Labour Conventions Nos. 29 and 105 concerning forced labour also prohibit debt bondage.

4. Despite the existence of these international standards, the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery recognized in its recommendation 12 adopted last year that some 20 million people are still held in debt bondage around the world and that the issue has not been addressed effectively at the international level (see E/CN.4/Sub.2/1999/17, Chap. IV, sect. B).

5. Debt bondage is still widespread in countries that are signatories to the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. Debt bondage is even prevalent in countries that have enacted domestic legislation that defines the offence of debt bondage and provides for the punishment of those responsible for using bonded labour.

6. Research carried out by Anti-Slavery International's partner organizations indicates that in countries where debt bondage is particularly widespread, Governments have not made sufficient efforts to identify and release bonded labourers. This research also shows that the number of prosecutions initiated against those responsible for keeping people in debt bondage is extremely low.

7. The fact that this grave human rights violation can still be perpetrated with impunity in countries which have expressly passed domestic legislation to prohibit this practice is clearly a significant factor in explaining why debt bondage continues to affect millions of people around the world today. With this in mind Anti-Slavery International would urge the Commission to focus its attention on resolving this human rights abuse and press Member States to implement resolutions of the fifty-fifth session which are essential if the use of debt bondage is to be eradicated. We would particularly highlight the following recommendations:

(a) That States should ratify the pertinent international instruments which prohibit the use of bonded labour and develop specific legislation to define and outlaw the offence of debt bondage, if they have not already done so. This was called for in the last report of the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery (E/CN 4/Sub 2/1999/17, see Sub-Commission resolution 1999/17),

(b) That States should be urged to carry out detailed regional surveys to identify and rehabilitate bonded labourers. States should also ensure that those responsible for keeping individuals in debt bondage are charged and prosecuted in accordance with domestic legislation. The importance of combating impunity for the prevention of human rights violations was emphasized in Commission resolution 1999/58 on impunity of perpetrators of violations of economic, social and cultural rights,

(c) That the Secretary-General designate the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as the focal point for the coordination of activities and the dissemination of information in the United Nations system on the suppression of contemporary forms of slavery. This was requested in Commission resolution 1999/46 on contemporary forms of slavery and should help to ensure that slavery issues, such as bonded labour, are mainstreamed throughout the United Nations system.